

Milton activists reflect on landmark legislation for marriage equality



Longtime equal rights advocates Douglas, left, and Corey Marshall-Steele legally changed their names in 1995 to share a hyphenated last name as a step to affirm their love and commitment. (Delaware State News/Ashley Dawson)

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DOVER — In the moments after the governor signed the marriage-equality bill on the steps inside Legislative Hall, lawmakers and supporters, gay and straight, cheered the landmark legislation, making Delaware the 11th state in the nation to legalize same-sex marriage.

Douglas and Corey Marshall-Steele embraced, because in that moment of celebrating joy, that's what most couples in love do.

For the Marshall-Steeles, as they officially became 18 years ago, advocating for equal rights is as natural to them as being gay.

It's who they are.

"We're LGBT activists because we believe the last phrase of the Pledge of Allegiance: with liberty and justice for all," Douglas said, in an interview last week. "It seems like the only honest way to live."

After years of working literally "toward equality," as Douglas's website is called, watching the Senate Tuesday pass House Bill 75 and Gov. Jack Markell sign it into law minutes later was a surreal experience for the Milton couple.

"It didn't seem like after all this time, it just happened," said Corey. "It was a pretty amazing day."

Douglas said being in Legislative Hall Tuesday was a privilege.

"It's a great time to be in Delaware," he said.

The Marshall-Steeles started legalizing their relationship nearly two decades ago, first changing their names and then having a holy union, though it didn't secure any legal protections at the time.

In 2004, Douglas created his website as a resource and outlet for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advocacy. It features information on how to lobby effectively, how to write a letter to the editor (with email addresses for 27 newspapers), how to contact Delaware's elected officials and more. It has drawn inquiries from across the country.

He and Corey were at the state's first marriage equality rally in 2008 in front of Dover's City Hall. For the most part, people reacted positively, waving, honking their horns. Some people pulled over to say they supported the cause.

The couple, members of All Saints' Church in Rehoboth Beach, has volunteered at Pride festivals and held fundraisers for political campaigns.

And they've lived their lives, taking everyday moments as opportunities to teach people, from friends to strangers.

"I just saw it as a total justice issue. If I was gay or not, it's a justice issue," said Douglas, who comes from activists roots. His grandmother was a suffragist in northeastern Pennsylvania and his grandparents were prohibitionists.

The Marshall-Steeles describe their work as mostly education, partly teaching people about LGBT issues and demystifying them about being gay.

"We're not that exotic," Corey said, joking that his wild Friday night would involve watching the news after hitting the farmers' market.

Douglas added, “I like to think we’re conventional, but some would call us boring.”

They’re fine with that.

Though steadily advocating for years, they don’t take credit for Tuesday’s historic bill signing.

“It’s not us. It’s all of us working together who honed our skills, strengthened our talents and found best practices to get where we are today,” said Douglas, naming leaders in the Equality Delaware organization such as Drew Fennell, Lisa Goodman and Mark Purpura.

“This is a true grassroots movement.”

Legislation in Delaware

Having watched it take 11 years to pass legislation making it illegal to discriminate against a person’s sexual orientation, Corey was surprised the state progressed from civil unions to marriage equality in just a few years.

“I’m floored. I thought I would be much, much older,” said Corey, who turns 44 next month.

The law, which carried many bill numbers over the years, ultimately passed in 2009 and forbid discrimination against a person on the basis of sexual orientation in housing, employment, public works contracting, public accommodations and insurance.

“For years and years and years, it was bottled up,” he said.

Though Corey and Douglas celebrated the progress and the passage of marriage equality this week, their work isn’t over.

The nondiscrimination law doesn’t include transgender bias — “a glaring deficiency,” Douglas said, explaining a recent email from an individual considering traveling to Delaware who wondered if they would encounter problems as a transgender, using a public restroom in the state.

“To me, that breaks my heart,” he said. “There aren’t any legal protections in Delaware.”

“I hope it will come up very soon.”

In recent years, the couple has seen more same-gender couples hyphenate their names, and they’ve seen more efforts grow to create equality and awareness for LGBT issues, such as mentoring programs, anti-bullying efforts, and gay-straight alliances.

“All these areas are being added and we’re happy to see that,” Douglas said.

A page of the TowardEquality website features a lengthy timeline of significant dates in Delaware's gay rights movement.

John Brady, the state's first openly gay man elected to office, rattled off four accomplishments in a conversation last week: Inclusion of sexual orientation in Delaware's hate crimes law, passed in 1997. Sexual orientation antidiscrimination legislation, in 2009. Recognizing civil unions in 2011. Marriage equality in 2013.

"And Corey and Doug were great influences in that timeline," he said.

Though the marriage-equality bill passed just four weeks after being introduced, it wasn't without heated debate and passionate opposition. Roughly three hours of debate preceded Tuesday's 12-9 vote.

Opponents cited religious beliefs and Bible references as reasons to prohibit same-sex marriage.

Someone walked past Corey in Legislative Hall last week and called him a sinner.

"What do you say to that?," he asked.

Setting precedent

After meeting in 1994, the couple decided to legally change their names, hyphenating their last names to become Marshall-Steele in March 1995.

That change set precedent for a case that was challenged later.

Mr. Brady remembers the details well. He's friends with that New Jersey couple who were originally denied when living in Delaware.

The New Castle County Court of Common Pleas denied their change, so the men appealed their case to Superior Court. Citing the Marshall-Steeles success in Sussex County's Court of Common Pleas, the higher court ruled there was no basis for denying the name change.

A few months after changing their names, the Marshall-Steeles held a holy union in their garden and celebrated their love and commitment with friends and family.

This summer they'll celebrate 18 years together. Though they had a civil union Jan. 7, 2012, after Delaware passed legislation recognizing civil unions between same-sex couples and they will pursue paperwork as soon as possible when marriage equality takes effect July 1, they don't celebrate those dates.

“We count the exchange of our vows Aug. 5, 1995, as our wedding day because we were living into our prerogatives,” Douglas said.

Corey said, “In the interim years, we had to hire lawyers” to draft wills, power of attorney orders and documents outlining hospital visitation, rights secured through Delaware’s civil unions and now same-sex marriage law.

But without federal recognition of same-sex marriage, the couple is very conscious of traveling outside of Delaware to states without protection.

In Douglas’s home state of Pennsylvania, for instance, protections of same-sex couples aren’t guaranteed. If one of them got sick, they wouldn’t be guaranteed protection.

“We felt it was risky,” he said. “We didn’t have the rights of a relationship. Our attention is focused on the Supreme Court.”

The U.S. Supreme Court is to rule on the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, passed in 1996 and defining marriage as the legal union between one man and one woman. It denies 1,100 federal benefits, including Social Security and veterans’ spousal benefits, for same-sex couples.

As the Marshall-Steeles wait, they’ll keep working and educating through living.

Like they did when they planned their wedding and sought a cake topper with two grooms. (That was before Amazon, Corey points out, so the search was limited to a bricks- and-mortar store.)

“Every step along the way was a chance to negotiate a teaching moment,” Douglas said.

Opportunities are countless. A contractor working on their house asked for help understanding a nephew who had recently come out. A new neighbor sought advice when their teenage son said he was gay.

“That’s what life has been for us — to be aware and alert to possibilities and just not be ashamed of who you are,” Corey said.

Douglas quickly added, “There’s no reason to be.”

“It’s based upon my faith. Truthfulness is intrinsic to my religious belief. To go against that would be to commit sin,” he said.